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ABSTRACT

This report provides information on gifted and talented education in Alaska, based on a survey of 154 teachers and 728 parents in 41 of 54 school districts. The report describes student eligibility, service availability, curriculum and administrative models, teacher training, parent satisfaction, and service evaluation. The report considers specific issues such as evaluation criteria used in placement decisions, the effects of independent program development by individual school districts, variables influencing participation, service models used, number of students per content area, the impact of district size on course offerings, teacher preparation, and parent satisfaction by student age and enrollment time. The report concludes that a statewide policy is needed to equitably deliver appropriate services to gifted and talented students. (JDD)

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GIFTED EDUCATION IN ALASKA

STATE OF THE STATE

GOVERNOR'S COUNCIL ON DISABILITIES AND SPECIAL EDUCATION

P.O. Box 240249
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September 1992

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PURPOSE

During the 1988-89 school year, the Alaska Governor's Council for the Handicapped and Gifted [renamed the Governor's Council for Disabilities and Special Education (GCDSE), 1992] embarked on a process of analyzing the state of Gifted and Talented Education throughout the state. The data collected by the Council are summarized here with recommendations to the Governor, the Board of Education and the Legislature.

Information obtained from school district service plans and surveys of parents and education staff include the following areas of interest:

- Student eligibility
- Service availability
- Curriculum/administrative models
- Teacher training
- Parent satisfaction
- Service evaluation

METHODOLOGY

A study of Gifted and Talented Education was conducted statewide through mail-out surveys to administrators, teachers and parents. District directors of Special Education were interviewed by telephone to ensure that a sufficient number of districts would be represented in the survey. Follow-up calls were made to achieve the best possible rate of return on mail-out surveys.

In 1989, 3577 students participated in Gifted and Talented Education in Alaska. Surveys were sent to parents of these students. 728 parent surveys were returned to the Governor's Council. At least some data exists from all 54 school districts in the state from the interviews with district directors. Evaluation criteria data has been reported for 37

of the 54 school districts (68.5%). Student/teacher data was received from 41 of the 54 Alaska school districts (75.9%) and is reflected in this report. In all, information on 154 teachers and 728 students in 41 school districts has been recorded and analyzed.

District information has been presented according to district size. The ten largest districts comprise the "large" districts, the ten smallest districts make up the "small" districts and the 21 districts in between fall in the "medium" districts category.

INFORMATION OVERVIEW

The goal of Gifted Education in the State of Alaska, like other special education, is to serve students based on their individual needs. This means that specific activities listed in the Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) for gifted and talented students should be determined by individual evaluation procedures. Proper identification provides the basis for gifted services therefore, the evaluation procedure and criteria are critical to the success of the services given or received.

The identification process and criteria for gifted and talented students is unlike the process and criteria for other exceptionalities. The gifted and talented student identification process is left up to the individual districts to delineate and administer. Specialized education services in programs other than gifted and talented are generally developed at the uppermost administrative levels. For example, eligibility for special education for individuals with cognitive deficiencies is specifically defined in federal regulation by IQ, social behavior measures and other means. In contrast, gifted and talented services and eligibility is entirely determined by individual district.

Student eligibility for Gifted and Talented Education is determined by a variety of means. Each school district is responsible for establishing and using a screening process. All districts reported that student, parent, teacher and peer referrals could be used to draw

students into the gifted and talented referral process. Parental consent is required before any formal evaluation procedure can be initiated. A number of individual or group testing instruments are used by the various districts to determine eligibility for services. Various intelligence quotient (IQ), ability, achievement and behavior rating scales are used by districts to assess students. A breakdown of the specific tests used and the prevalence of their use is provided in Figure 1.0. In addition to formal testing instruments, a student product may be submitted for review. Test scores are rarely used in isolation to determine eligibility. In addition to the twenty-one districts that use a multi-disciplinary team to assess students on a rubric of skills or requirements, a few districts also use a matrix system for evaluation. According to standard procedure established by the state definition (Alaska Statute 14.30.350), all school districts should determine eligibility by using multiple criteria with direction from a multi-disciplinary team to make placement recommendations.

Figure 1.0, Gifted Student Assessment Procedures, outlines the qualification procedures used in identifying students eligible for gifted and talented services across Alaska school districts.

Figure 1.0: Gifted Student Assessment Procedures

Number of districts reporting assessment procedures	37
Number of districts using most common tests of IQ:	
Stanford-Binet	6
WISC	10
KABC	7
Slosson	4
Number of districts using most common ability tests:	
CogAT	1
Raven	5

Figure 1.0 continued

Number of districts using most common achievement tests:

SAT	4
ITBS	3
PIAT	5
WRAT	4
Woodcock-Johnson	17
Metropolitan	1
CTBS	3
District Achievement Tests	4

Number of districts using most common inventories:

Renzulli Scale	19
Baldwin Matrix	7

Number of districts that use a multi-disciplinary team	21
Number of districts that use IQ score cut-offs	2
Number of districts that require student interviews	5
Number of districts that require student product	8

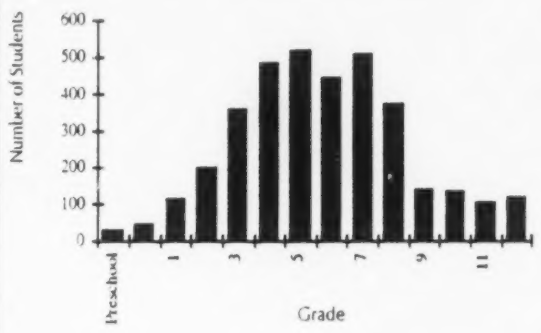
DISTRICT-TO-DISTRICT SERVICES

Gifted and Talented Education services exist in nearly every school district in Alaska and each district maintains its own service plans.

No state-level standard for Gifted and Talented Education exists in teacher preparation, level of service or curriculum development. In evaluating data from the various school districts across the state, the effects of independent program development are easily identified. First, the percentage of students identified and served as gifted and/or talented ranges from 0-17%. Additionally, many school districts, especially those in remote areas do not offer the range of gifted and talented services that larger, more urban districts do because of the limited resources available to them. *The Department of Education currently lacks a Gifted and Talented Education staff position. This situation appears to be a causal factor in the discrepancies in uniform practices in Gifted and Talented Education across the state.*

Figure 2

Number of Students by Grade



VARIABLES IN PARTICIPATION

Figure 2.0, Number of Students by Grade, shows that the greatest portion of students participating in Gifted and Talented Education services are in grades three through eight. Very few pre-school through grade two evaluation procedures are sufficient to identify or serve gifted and talented students because testing instruments are generally unreliable for this population. In addition, it is generally believed that regular classroom educational offerings are sufficient to meet the needs of the majority of very young students.

It is felt that the classroom structure in grades three through six lend themselves to traditional pull-out programming techniques. However, in the upper grades the routines which facilitate pull-out services are disrupted by scheduling conflicts. Additionally, the course offerings available to students in the larger schools tend to diffuse the gifted and talented population. For example, at a large high school, an English requirement can be met through a grade-level English class, a composition class, a specialized literature class, an honors class. Often, honors level courses are not classified as gifted and talented services because administrators want to broaden student participation in these programs

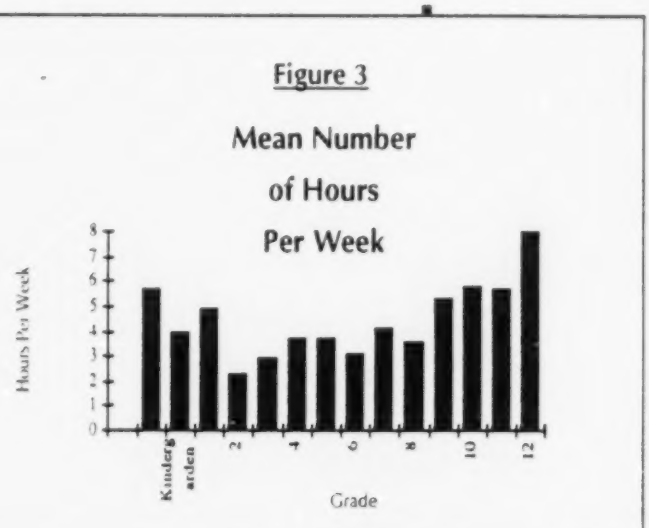
Other variables that may affect the numbers of junior and senior high school students participating in Gifted and Talented Education include: teacher expertise; teacher training; limited course offerings; scheduling; time; a full range of regular course offerings; emphasis on other high-level course offerings–mentorships, apprenticeships; dual enrollment (high school/college); distance delivered courses; overcrowding of gifted classrooms (in some districts); and limitation of services to students certified as gifted and talented.

The methods of curriculum delivery may or may not be considered as gifted and talented programming. The variability of programming options is totally dependent upon the individual district's view of Gifted and Talented Education.

For example, a student in a large school who is likely to participate in gifted and talented programs is generally taking Advanced Placement and other accelerated classes, and does not have time for an additional gifted and talented course. This means that students who received gifted and talented services in grade eight and earlier may no longer be reflected in accounts of the gifted and talented population during their high school years. At the same time, they could just as easily appear in Gifted and Talented Education services programming for over half the day, depending on the particular service delivery model used.

As Figure 3.0 Mean Number of Hours per Week demonstrates, a relatively high number of gifted and talented service hours exist in pre-school, kindergarten, first, ninth, tenth, eleventh and twelfth grades. This can occur because of the nature of the service models for Gifted and Talented Education services at these grade levels. A vast number of contact hours can easily be reported when alternative programming such as mentorships, apprenticeships, AP courses and acceleration are used to extend placement hours.

Figure 3

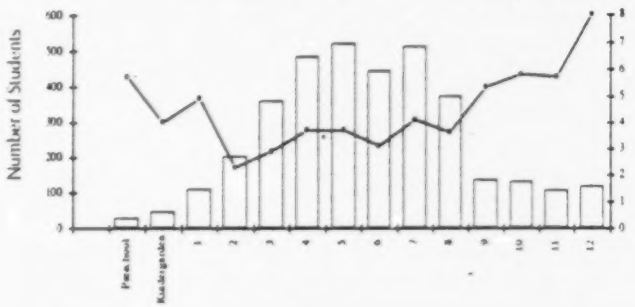


In the junior high and high school grades, the nature of gifted and talented service models also affects the number of contact hours. If honors courses are considered to be gifted and talented services, then the number of hours in gifted and talented programming will increase. A student who is enrolled in one or more honors classes may receive

five hours or more of gifted and talented instruction per week. A large part of this effect is a result of the type of service models most popular in secondary schools. High school students are likely to have separate courses in honors or gifted and talented courses. Students in grades three through six are more likely to receive services through a pull-out or in-classroom consultation model wherein only the amount of time that the students are actually out of the regular classroom may be counted.

Figure 4

Number of Students and Hours by Grade



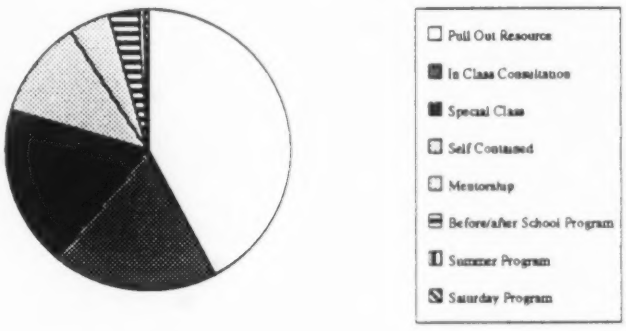
If Figures 2.0 and 3.0 are overlaid, an interesting effect between the number of gifted and talented students and the number of gifted and talented service hours is presented. The number of students in the upper-most and lower-most grades is low, yet the number of service hours in those grades is high. Figure 4.0, **Number of Students and Hours by Grade**, demonstrates the divergence in hours relative to student enrollment.

The other major factor contributing to the effect of high service hours relative to low student enrollment is the type of service model available to these students. The very early grades and the high school grades are likely to serve gifted and talented students in separate class or mentorship models. The middle grades (three through eight) are more likely to offer gifted and talented services through in-class consultation or removal from the regular classroom. Both of these models permit only a limited amount of gifted and talented program time.

Figure 5.0, **Percentage of Students per Service Model**, shows that a high percentage of gifted and talented service occurs through a classroom pull-out service model. This is particularly true in grades three through eight. Pull-out services are popular because they are low cost. Pull-out services account for 70% of the gifted and talented programming nationally. No special classroom is required, as courses are often

Figure 5

Percentage of Students per Service Model

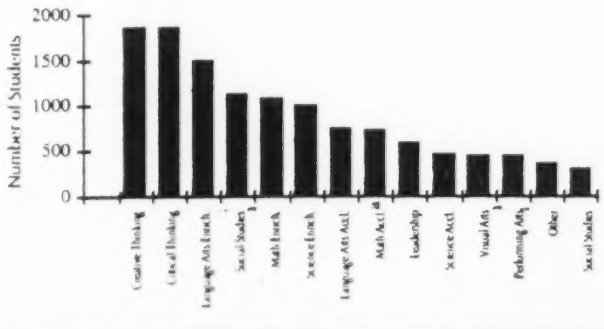


conducted in storage and other "extra" spaces. The cost of staffing for gifted and talented services is minimized because a single teacher can serve students in many different grade levels. Also, teachers can serve many students over several grade levels in one day. In-class consultation service is popular for the same reason. This is perhaps the most cost-effective model of service delivery, because no special facility is required. The gifted and talented services teacher visits a number of classrooms in one day to offer enriched or accelerated materials. In this service model, a student may see his/her gifted services teacher only once or twice a week, for a total of 30 to 90 minutes per week. This compares with a student who receives gifted services through a separate classroom setting. The student who attends a daily class of even 30 minutes per day receives 150 minutes of services per week.

Figure 6.0, Number of Students per Content Area, delineates the number of students certified as gifted and talented in the state of Alaska.

Figure 6

Nmber of Students per Content Area



Discrepancies in student numbers per content area can be most readily explained by teacher influence on curriculum offerings. It is important to understand that gifted and talented education is largely dependent on the strengths and weaknesses of the individual instructors. For example, an instructor

with a strong background in language arts will generally feel quite comfortable offering language arts enrichment. However, s/he may not feel comfortable offering accelerated mathematics services. Because of this, language arts gifted and talented education services may be available, but a mathematics service may not. This situation is prevalent, especially in small school districts where teachers are expected to fill a number of roles. This limitation is likely the cause of much of the discrepancy in student enrollment across subject areas.

It is important to remember that creative and critical thinking content areas show relatively high enrollment because this type of curriculum is generally taught in gifted and talented programs regardless of subject matter. A student enrolled in a gifted and talented mathematics service will receive instruction in creative and critical thinking, just as other students will in language arts and social sciences. The cross-content nature of these skills results in the high number of students reported in these areas.

Figure 7

Percentage of Students per Aggregate Content Area

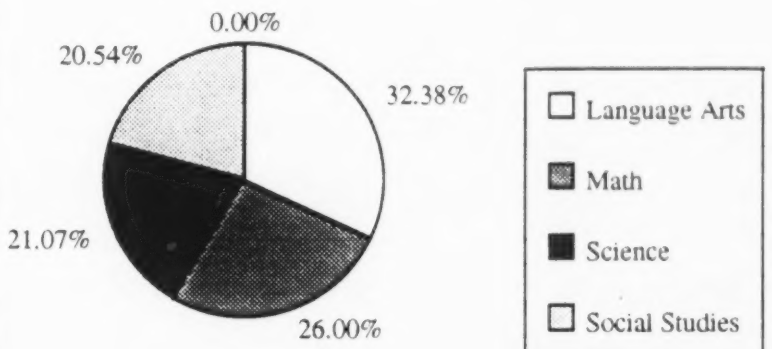


Figure 7.0, **Percentage of Students per Aggregate Content Area**, reflects the number of students enrolled in four content areas. Language arts students account for just over 30% of the total enrollment in gifted and talented services.

Figures 8.1-8.8, **Content Area by District Size**, demonstrate the availability of gifted and talented education services in small, medium and large districts. These graphs will first be discussed individually, and then as a body, to more clearly delineate trends in course offerings according to district size.

Figure 8.1, **Math Acceleration**, shows medium and large districts with a significantly lower percentage of students enrolled in math acceleration courses than small districts. This may reflect the variety of course offerings in the different size districts. Generally, larger districts have a greater number of course options available to gifted and talented students. This is especially true in the area of mathematics. The medium and large districts tend to offer mathematics enrichment courses as well as mathematics acceleration. This theory is clarified by Figure 8.2, **Mathematics Enrichment**, which shows a dramatically higher level of enrichment offerings in the medium and large districts as compared with the small districts.

Language Arts Acceleration, Figure 8.3, demonstrates the imbalance of curriculum offerings in small school districts. Small school districts are not staffed to offer a wide range of gifted and talented curricula therefore, many students with a wide range of specific academic skills fall into the language arts courses. **Language Arts Enrichment** (Figure 8.4) course offerings follow a similar trend, reinforcing the notion that a disproportionate number of students receive language arts services regardless of specific strengths and weaknesses in humanities courses.

Figure 8.1 Math Acceleration

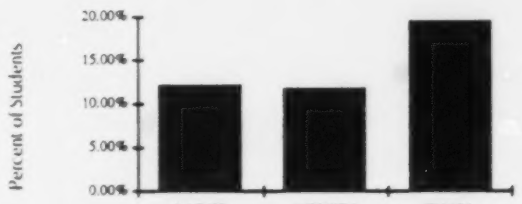


Figure 8.2 Math Enrichment

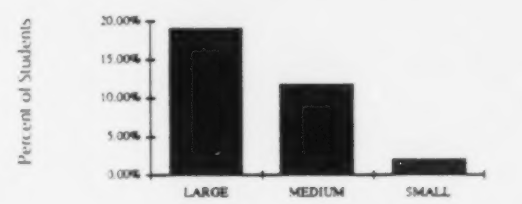


Figure 8.3 Language Arts Acceleration

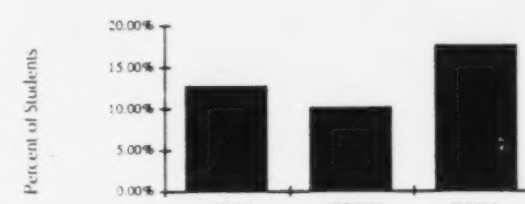


Figure 8.4 Language Arts Enrichment

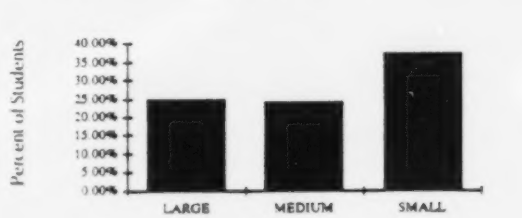


Figure 8.5 Social Studies Acceleration

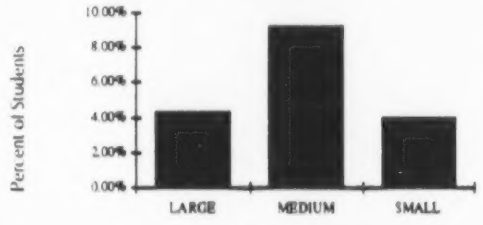


Figure 8.6 Social Studies Enrichment

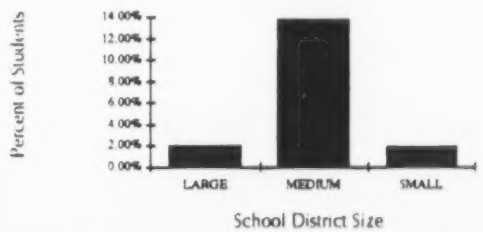


Figure 8.7 Science Acceleration

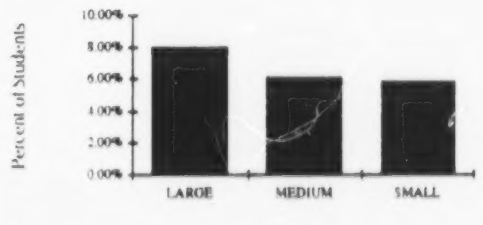
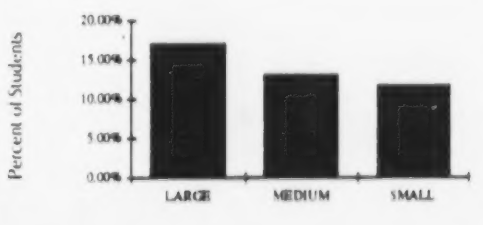


Figure 8.8 Science Enrichment



This view is corroborated by the distribution of students in Social Studies Acceleration/Enrichment courses, Figures 8.5 and 8.6 which show low enrollments in the small districts. The relative number of students enrolled in social studies acceleration is quite low. The low enrollment in these courses in large school districts may be due to the wide range of general education course offerings available, including AP and honors courses which are not always classified as gifted and talented. Students who are enrolled in AP and Honors courses are therefore not always reflected in this account of gifted and talented students.

Medium and small school districts show fewer students enrolled in Science Acceleration/Enrichment (Figure 8.7 and 8.8). Again, this is a function of limited staffing in the smaller school districts. It is important to note that the percentage of students enrolled in science acceleration is considerably lower than the other curriculum areas except social studies acceleration (Figure 8.5).

The medium districts appear to be more similar to large districts than small districts in regard to variety of course offerings. This phenomenon may be explained by the degree and availability of individualized courses in the various districts. The largest districts may curtail the number of gifted and talented course offerings because they are not cost-effective in overcrowded schools. The smallest districts are simply unable to offer certain gifted and talented services because of the lack of teacher expertise and resources in a given area. That is, if no teacher is qualified to teach the class, it is not offered. The scenario in medium-sized districts is somewhat more balanced than in either the largest or the smallest districts. Medium districts, where they are not overcrowded or short-staffed, have a variety of staff resources available to address the needs of gifted and talented students. In addition, overcrowding and class size are not primary considerations in determining the availability of Gifted and Talented Education services. That is, the medium districts have the ability to offer highly specialized classes to gifted and talented students because they are big enough to have access to teaching resources, while they have classroom space available to serve students in a highly individualized manner.

No districts have a lock on a perfectly proportional spread of curriculum offerings. All the districts, regardless of size, have the largest number of students enrolled in Language Arts Enrichment curriculum. However, medium school districts appear to have the best spread of students across all subject areas, for reasons discussed above.

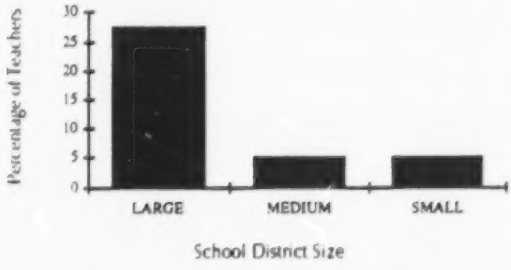
The smallest school districts have a high percentage of students concentrated in Math Acceleration, and have relatively few students enrolled in Social Studies Acceleration and Social Studies Enrichment. These trends may be simply the result of normal statistical variation within the small number of students in the small and medium district services. If the total number of students enrolled in these districts' classes are small, then the relative percentage of students could be easily skewed by just a handful of students.

TEACHER EDUCATION

District-level analysis of Gifted and Talented Education services draws attention to the impact that teacher preparation has on services. Teachers control the content of gifted and talented services in accordance with their individual strengths and weaknesses. Related to this fact is the **Number of Teacher In-Service Hours**, shown in Figure 10.0.

Figure 10

Nmber of Teacher In-Service Hours



This graph clearly shows that teachers in small school districts have less in-service training than teachers in large districts. This inequity is important because it is the teachers in small districts who are most in need of being able to offer a wide range of services in order to meet all the needs of the districts' students.

Additionally, Figure 11.0, **Teacher Coursework**, shows a 20% disparity across different sized districts in teacher education at the college level in gifted and talented services.

Figure 11 Teacher Coursework

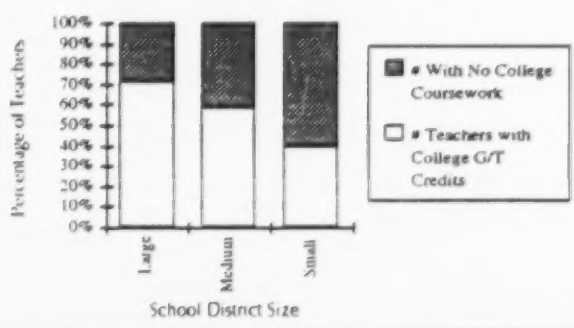
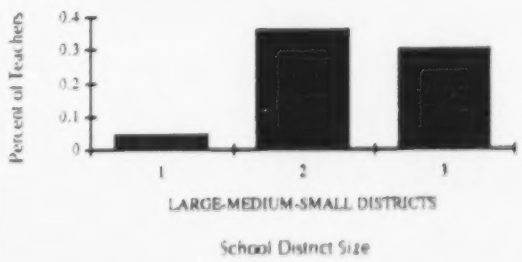


Figure 12

Coursework/In-Service Needs



The need for in-service in medium and small districts is quite similar (within 5%), as shown in Figure 12.0, **Coursework/In-service Needs**. The University of Alaska Distance Education program has begun to offer Gifted and Talented Education coursework to rural Alaska. The State of Alaska requires all teachers of gifted and talented services to have six credit hours of college-level

education in the field by July, 1993. Approximately 50 teachers enroll in one or both of the available courses in Gifted and Talented Education per term. *It is probable that follow-up training developed at the state level can assist in helping educators meet the goals of Gifted and Talented Education.*

PARENT PERCEPTIONS

While an investigation into district and teacher level programming issues is important, the final product of the services must be acknowledged. Objective review of student benefits derived from Gifted and Talented Education is not always possible. However, a parent survey of Gifted and Talented Individualized Education Program (IEP) satisfaction appears to be an appropriate measure of program success.

As can be seen in Figure 13.0, **Program (IEP) Satisfaction by Student Age**, parent satisfaction appears to peak at 80 plus percent when the student is age 12, approximately grade 6. Level of satisfaction drops sharply after age 14, approximately grade eight. Many factors may contribute to this decline. First, Gifted and Talented offerings are diffused during the high school grades by the presence of honors courses and other curricula. High school level Gifted and Talented courses are uncommon, and are generally offered through non-traditional service models like the mentorship program. Many students are uncomfortable with the label of Gifted and Talented, and therefore shun Gifted and Talented Education services.

Figure 13

Program (IEP) Satisfaction by Student Age

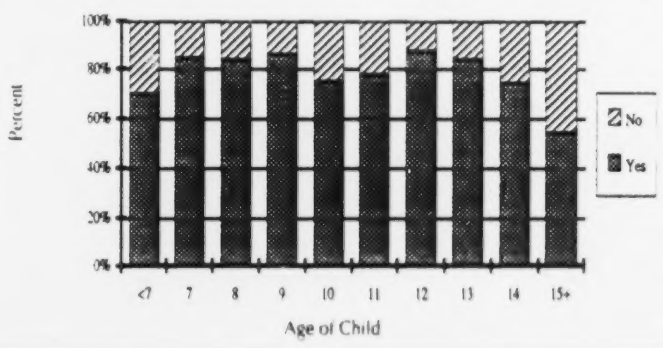
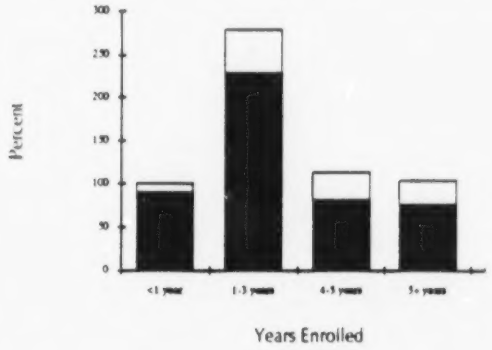


Figure 14

Program Satisfaction by Enrollment Time



The drop in the level of parent satisfaction may be related to the length of time the student has been certified as gifted and/or talented; see Figure 14.0 **Program (IEP) Satisfaction by Enrollment Time.** However, the exact nature of this relationship is unclear. Issues pertinent to this relationship, including drop-out rate, service model and course content should be explored in a further study.

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The preceding report clearly shows that a statewide policy is needed to equitably deliver appropriate services to the gifted and talented students. This policy should include implementation and evaluation procedures. This process would have two direct benefits. First, it would allow gifted and talented students equitable access to programming and services across the state. In short, a student certified as gifted in one district would also be considered to be gifted in another district. And second, it would provide objective data for program evauation purposes.

1) Create a full-time staff position, resources and appropriate funding at the Department of Education adequate to develop and implement policy and minimum guidelines for Gifted and Talented Education statewide.

2) Develop Gifted and Talented Education policy, including implementation and evaluation methods, within a strict timeline.